

## Administrative Lies and Philosopher-Kings

(Published: Philosophical Inquiry, 18, 1996, 45-65.)

David Simpson  
Philosophy  
University of Wollongong  
Australia

### 1. Introduction

I want to consider the question: whether it is acceptable for those who govern to lie to those they govern. I suspect that many would reply that while it is an ideal of liberal and enlightenment values that such acts not occur, psychological, epistemic and political realities make them necessary for good government, and therefore acceptable under certain conditions. Rather than address directly the intuitions behind such a response, I shall consider the question in the light of the apparent recommendation in the Republic that the rulers of the city of the Republic (the philosopher-kings) sometimes lie to its citizens.

This focusing of the question has the primary virtue of paring the issues down to an ideal case (given a certain reading of the Republic, it sets out the ideal conditions under which such rulers' lies - what we might call 'governing', or 'administrative' lies - might be acceptable), and so clearly focusing the question of in-principle acceptability. It has the secondary virtue of allowing me to highlight an aspect of the Republic which, while possibly central to the work and to our understanding of it, receives surprisingly little attention. Inasmuch as the recommendation is noted, the actual lies mentioned in the Republic tend to be regarded and judged as a bundle - as the "noble lie" - and much of the subtlety and interest of this feature of the work is lost.

I will begin by noting two discussions which do treat the recommendation in detail and in the context of the overall structure of the Republic: the discussions by T. C. Brickhouse and N. D. Smith (1983), and by C. D. C. Reeve (1988). These also offer in-principle defences of rulers' lies, in that they argue that in the context of the Republic, and in the light of its metaphysics, the recommendation that rulers should sometimes lie is coherent.

I will then, in the body of the paper, show how the recommendation in the Republic, in spite of these defences, is incoherent. And I will argue that the failure of the ideal case undermines attempts to rationalise administrative deceit by reference to some sort of political realism. I will also, however, qualify the assumption that Plato does in fact recommend that his philosopher-kings rule a city with lies.

To begin, and having flagged the future qualification, we need to grant some minimal assumptions, in order for the discussion to get started. We need to accept that Plato has Socrates recommend that the rulers lie - that Socrates recommends practices that amount to lying, and recommends such practices as lies. We also need to accept that the philosopher-kings introduced in response to the Third Wave are rulers who are to lie.

Given this, we can say that rulers' lies are mentioned at four places in the Republic: during the discussion of the education of children, when Socrates recommends that the stories that are told in this education are censored (378b-d); in the discussion of medicinal lies (382a-e); with the recommendation of the noble lie, or myth of the metals (414b-460c); and in the recommendation of a sexual lottery to control breeding (459d-460c). Plato seems to think that the practices referred to are relevantly similar: see 382d1-4 for a reference from the verbal medicinal lies back to the education; see 414c1-2 for a reference from the noble lie back to the medicinal lies; and see 459c7-d1 for a reference from the breeding lottery back to the medicinal lies. Reeve agrees with this assessment. Brickhouse and Smith think that the noble lie must be set aside as an educative myth (1983, pp. 82-84).<sup>1</sup>

A charge of incoherence regarding the recommendation supposed here arises from the apparent conflict between the required nature of the city's rulers and their required practices. This apparent incoherence can be seen as an aspect of the general problem of the philosophers going back down into the cave. The problem seems to be: the city must be ruled by philosophers if it is to be just; philosophers must by nature love truth; rulers must by necessity lie.

## **2. The True, and Verbal Lies**

The common ground between the solutions offered by Brickhouse and Smith and by Reeve is the idea that the lies are a necessary aspect of the attempt to create an imitation of justice in the city, and that within Platonic metaphysics the lies of the

rulers and the truth the rulers love operate on different planes and do not come into direct conflict. This idea does show, I think, how the lies may introduce no incoherence, in Plato's terms. It also offers a plausible explanation of why the lies are treated, within the Republic, as relatively unproblematic. Yet this interpretation also makes clear, against its intentions, one way in which the Republic comes up against the difficulty of bringing together metaphysically distinct categories: justice and the city; the real and appearance; truth and imitation.

### *The True*

The central plank of Brickhouse and Smith's defence is Vlastos's emphasis of the distinction between sentential and evaluative senses of 'true' (see Vlastos 1965, 1; Brickhouse and Smith 1983, pp. 86-7). Evaluatively, 'true' is close to 'real', as when someone might synonymously be called "a true friend" or "a real friend". Brickhouse and Smith suggest that we regard the truth the philosophers love as evaluative truth, applying to non-linguistic objects and arranged in various degrees (1983, p. 87). Thus, being single-mindedly devoted to the truth need not require that one always "tell the truth"; it requires that one is unwaveringly concerned with "what is real" or "what is good" (1983, p. 86).

On this account, the rulers should be considered on the model of craftsmen, desiring that each created thing be the best possible image of the appropriate form. For statecraft, the appropriate form is justice, and in imitating justice the rulers may have to honour the true in seemingly paradoxical ways, including lying.

The condition that must be met, ... if Plato's account of his rulers is to be coherent, is that each time they lie the product of their actions must be a closer approximation of Justice than honesty would have been. Wherever this is the case, the paradox that they will be liars and yet love the truth above all else vanishes, for it is their love of truth vis-à-vis Justice that requires the lies they tell. (Brickhouse and Smith 1983, pp. 87-8)

This gives Brickhouse and Smith a model for their analysis of the actual recommended lies. They note that Socrates' argument in Book 1 (see 331a-d), that it could not be just to tell the truth to a madman, fits this model. As Plato would regard children in the same light as madmen, they say, lies to children also fit the model - justice (so 'truth') will be aided by sometimes lying to them in their education. In the administration of breeding, if the rulers were sentiently honest, they would run the risk of dissension among the spirited and easily wounded guardians. This would

produce disharmony and strife, and hence injustice. The lies, say Brickhouse and Smith, avoid this and create a sense of brotherhood, thus allowing the breeding program to continue. They thus help produce a better image of justice.

Provided that the sentential falsehoods in which they engage are well-fitted to the creation and preservation of the clearest possible images of the Form of Justice in each case, they are, in Plato's sense, the truest of the sentences that could be spoken by the rulers. (Brickhouse and Smith 1983, pp. 88-9)

### *Verbal lies*

Reeve bases his approach on the distinction Socrates draws at the end of Book 2 between true (or real) lies and verbal lies. The distinction is drawn in the midst of the argument for the demand that the gods not be represented as using lies or disguise. According to this argument, verbal lies are useful to men, like a drug. They are useful against enemies, against friends who attempt wrong through madness or ignorance, and when in stories we are ignorant of the past but want to make the story as much like the truth as possible. Yet the gods are not ignorant of the past, do not fear their enemies, and do not have foolish or mad friends. Having no need for lies, the gods do not lie, and should not be represented as lying.

Socrates says that a true lie is hated by both gods and men (382a-e). According to Reeves translation of this passage, in a true lie someone lies "about the governing things to the governing part of himself." Socrates says that "to lie in the psyche about the things that are and to have been lied to and to be unlearned and to have and hold the lie there is what everyone would least of all accept ...". A true lie is "error in the psyche of the one who has been lied to" (Reeve 1988, p. 208). On the other hand, a verbal lie, or a lie in words, is "a sort of imitation of the affection in the psyche, an image of it that comes into being after it, and not an altogether pure lie" (Reeve 1988, p. 209).

Reeve regards the governing things, or the things that are, as the forms, and says that the governing part of the psyche is reason. "Hence a real lie is, in essence, one that misleads reason, and so prevents the psyche itself from achieving the good" (1988, p. 209).

In contrast, verbal lies, the imitations of real lies, only appear to mislead the governing part of the psyche. When used by one who knows the good they can steer

those misled by madness or ignorance towards the good. Their use, Reeve claims, does not conflict with, but aids, a love of truth and the good. On the other hand, non-philosopher citizens do not know the good itself, so their lies might be real, and so might lead the rulers and the city away from the good (1988, pp. 209-210).

According to Reeve, then, the medicinal lies, the myth of the metals, and the sexual lottery, are all intended to be verbal lies, and they are all deceptions that lead the citizens and the city as a whole towards the good.

The myth of the metals aims to tie the citizens together in bonds of love or friendship. Since such friendship is in fact well founded in mutual self-interest, those who believe the myth do not come to believe a real lie, for their belief leads them towards the good. Reeve says that instead of the rigged sexual lottery, contraception (I take it, enforced contraception) would be a better solution to the eugenics problem, since those citizens denied sex through the lottery are not compensated in the normal course of events. However, for contingent historical reasons it is the best solution (1988, pp. 210-11).

Reeve claims that the members of the city are not the victims of false ideology; rather, their ideology is falsely sustained. Given that the producers and guardian auxiliaries are by nature incapable of knowing the good directly, it is best, and best for them, that they are led to the good (by the ideology-free philosopher-kings) through judicious verbal lies (1988, pp. 212-213).

### **3. The Philosopher**

These defences share two important features. First, both take the lies to be required by the inability of ordinary citizens to recognise their best interest when presented with the truth, since their judgement will be guided by spirit or appetite.<sup>2</sup> Second, they find the acceptability of the lies in the distance between those who lie (the philosopher-kings) and those who are lied to, and this distance in turn rests on the distinction between the forms and the worldly instances that imitate those forms. I will argue that this apparently justifying distance in fact generates the incoherence in question. First, however, we need to review the philosophers themselves.

According to these defences philosophers may lie because they are able to lie well, and they do lie because they must. This is a view that fits well with much of the

Republic. Like a physician who is able to promote health through the administration of poison, the philosopher is able to cure ills that impede the realisation of justice in the city through administration of the drug of deceit. And the philosophers' lies are required because these ills are by hypothesis beyond the reach of the mere dietician's advice.

[W]hile an inferior doctor is adequate for people who are willing to follow a regimen and don't need drugs, when drugs are needed, we know that a bolder doctor is required. (459c)

Such people will not be cured by mere truth-telling, for the truth entailing their cure is beyond the grasp of those who have these ills. They are unable, in their actual constitution, to recognise the coincidence between their self-interest and the requirements for the best imitation of justice.

The philosopher is able to lie well because he has come to gaze upon the forms, and he has come to love the forms above all else. He knows the model for the worldly image, and so can use that, rather than the perspective of mortals, as a guide for his actions.

A true philosopher unwaveringly loves all and only that knowledge which makes clear the unchanging and everlasting reality of the forms; he is a friend of truth and justice, hates untruth, gives up the pleasures of the body, is moderate, generous and courageous, learns easily, has a good memory, and does not gossip (see, e.g., 485a-487a; 490b; 500b).

The question of a philosopher-king's motivation is complex,<sup>3</sup> but someone with such a nature, a true philosopher, will not desire leadership. He or she will become a ruler only if requested, and because the good (and thus the philosopher's duty and best interest) is served by doing so (519d-521a). This request is unlikely, since the many find most philosophers to be vicious and the rest to be useless (see 488-496a).

If, however, true philosophers do become rulers, their task is to set their city in order (500c-d; 540a-b) and bind it together (520a). This task is a craft, involving the creation of an image or imitation. The imitation is ultimately of the good, by way of imitations of certain positive virtues: justice, truth, moderation and courage. The philosopher moulds his own character so as to become divine and ordered as far as humans can be; and when a king, he moulds the characters of men in private and public life,

creating images of moderation and justice, and of popular virtue generally (500d). The philosopher-kings are like painters, using the divine model to sketch the outline of the city (500e). They would take the city and men's characters as a sketching slate; first wiping the slate clean, then sketching the shape of the constitution.

[A]s they work, they'd look often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they're trying to put into human beings, on the other. ...

They'd erase one thing, I suppose, and draw in another until they'd made characters for human beings that the gods would love as much as possible. (501b)

The image here is central to the type of interpretation Brickhouse and Smith and Reeve propose. The philosopher-king bridges the gap between form and instantiation: as philosopher, he dwells in the daylight and knows the good; as king, he returns to the cave and engages with appearance, imitation, and opinion.

If the philosopher-kings are liars, they cannot be gods, given the argument that the gods do not lie. And Socrates only asks they become "as divine and ordered as a human being can" (500d). Yet while mortal, they are special and specially trained - crucially, they are able to associate with the forms - and they do not sit comfortably in the flow of the Republic.

The city in speech has been developed in Books 2-5, and by the time of the Third Wave (471c ff) it is taken to be ruled by "complete guardian". These are "the best of the guardians ... best at guarding the city" (412c). The notion of such rulers is introduced after the Book 3 account of the education of young guardians and of general principles of education has concluded at 412b. The complete guardians must be knowledgeable and capable, and they must care for the city and pursue its advantage. Such care requires that they love the city, which in turn requires that they believe always that what is advantageous to the city is advantageous to themselves (412c-d).

To discover whether guardians have these features, but especially the crucial feature of only pursuing the city's advantage, they must be observed from childhood and tested (412e-414a). Only those who pass the tests are to be accepted as complete guardians. At this point the proposal is made that the stories making up the noble lie (with the dual conclusions that all in the city are siblings and the city and land a

mother, and that the social divisions of the citizens are pre-established) should be told to the entire city.

Note that these rulers are not the philosopher-kings. The point is perhaps obvious, but it is not, I think, always recognised, and its implications may not always be appreciated. Reeve is clear about the successive changes in rulers and constitution (1988, §4.2), but he only draws on part of what this particular change implies: that after the Third Wave the rulers have genuine knowledge.

The city thus ruled is accepted by Glaucon as completely good (427e), and the following passages establish that it has wisdom, courage, moderation, and (because of these virtues) justice (428a-433e). But Plato does not let Socrates rest with this. Book 5 begins the three waves (which take up Book 6 and 7 as well), where Glaucon and the others challenge the possibility of such a city. The First and Second Waves deal with the role of women and the holding of women and children in common. This is introduced in a peculiar (presumably ironic) way. At 449c Adeimantus demands that Socrates explain the claim at 424 that women and children will be kept in common. Socrates then (451c-457b) defends a new idea, that women and male guardians will share their entire way of life, in response to a supposed First Wave. He responds to the original demand as the Second Wave (457c-471b), within which the sexual lottery and the disguise of parentage are introduced.

The Third Wave is Glaucon's objection that despite all that has preceded, Socrates has not shown "whether its possible for this constitution [and so, the city ruled by complete guardians] to come into being and in what way it could be brought about" (471c).

Socrates then complains that he had been aiming for a model "to discover what justice itself is like and what the completely just man would be like" (472c) and that a model should not be condemned just because it could not come into being; and he demands that it be enough that he show how a city could come to be governed in a way that most closely approximates the model (473a).

And so, searching for the smallest possible change to existing cities, it turns out that they will have no rest from evil until



... philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide.... (473c-d)

Socrates seems to allow that this suggestion is outrageous, and Glaucon agrees, and from here we get the account of philosopher-kings.

The philosopher-kings do not, therefore, arise through elaboration, as the previous rulers did, but are forced on Socrates by a demand he claims to find unreasonable and beside the point, but which Glaucon presents as a challenge to what he seems to take to be the whole project.

#### **4. Imitations of the False**

I believe that the problem with the defences, and the problem with a requirement that philosopher-kings lie, is that lying corrupts a (Platonic) philosophical nature. The objection can be made in two ways.

##### *Lying as a procedure*

According to the short argument, the lies are corrupting because they require, in their very performance, denial of the philosopher's nature. This nature is defined by its unwavering focus on the good, the model on which the constitution of the city is based; the procedure of lying requires turning away from the good.

A true lie, as I have noted, is an untruth about the governing things, or the things that are - about the forms - which is held in the governing part of oneself, or in one's reason. A verbal lie, on the other hand, is an imitation of this untruth in the soul, which comes after it and is not an altogether pure lie. This point is important. A verbal lie is not an imitation of truth, but of true falsehood, and as an impure instantiation it falls short, not of truth, but of the falsehood we get in a true lie. An imitation of truth would be an utterance that aimed at truth, but like all instantiations fell short. An imitation of untruth, on the other hand, is an utterance that aims at falsehood, an intentional falsehood that falls short of true falsehood.

Reeve, who bases his defence specifically on the distinction, says that verbal lies, being imitations of real lies, only appear to mislead the governing part of the psyche, and then says that non-philosophers should not lie because they might unknowingly produce real lies. But this, I think, is to turn away from the crucial relation. The

important point is not that philosophers, as philosophers, know the difference between true and imitative lies; the important point is that in telling imitative or verbal lies they knowingly produce imitations of these true lies, that precede and form the exemplars for the verbal lies.

Similarly, Brickhouse and Smith claim that the sentential falsehoods are the truest of the sentences that could be spoken by the rulers in the light of their overall task of imitating the good. But these sentences themselves, as imitations of untruth, are a corrupting element in the overall relation of the rulers to the forms, and thereby a corruption of the nature of the rulers. Brickhouse and Smith focus on the overall image, the city as a whole; but this image is built up of parts, whose nature and relation are constituted through particular imitative acts.

One might respond that though the parts are imperfect, the behaviour of the rulers nonetheless leads the city, and thereby the citizens, towards the good. Again, however, the problem is that the fact of this behaviour undermines the characteristic that enables the rulers to know and aim at the good in the first place. Their philosophical nature is directly undermined, because in lying they produce imitations of true lies, of falsehoods about the forms, and thereby undermine their nature as imitators of the good. It may be that the lies are necessary, but if so, then adequate rulers are necessarily impossible.

This argument rests on my interpretation of the structure of a verbal lie when uttered by a philosopher. So, a philosopher uttering a verbal lie takes the false as a model, and is thereby no philosopher. But this interpretation may be controversial. It might be objected that when a philosopher utters a verbal lie the proposition expressed imitates the false, but the philosophers act is an act in imitation of the true and the good. I am unconvinced by this; nonetheless, it may help if we consider the issue in a different aspect.

### *Lying as a practice*

The philosophers who will be fit to rule desire the truth and always pursue it in every way (489e). They desire the whole of wisdom (475b) and, being able to embrace the nature of things themselves, possess knowledge (476ff). They also possess the virtues of courage, moderation and so on mentioned earlier (487a). This

establishes their nature, but it is not enough. Socrates asks whether we would entrust the city to them alone when they have reached maturity in age and education (487a). To this Adeimantus replies that while all should find Socrates' argument convincing they will still reject the conclusion, because they know that among philosophers most are cranks or vicious, and the decent ones are made useless to the city because of the very way of life Socrates recommends (487a-d). And Socrates says that they are right.

The useless philosophers seem initially to be accepted as true philosophers in Socrates sense. Their uselessness is partly a matter of ordinary people not being able to recognise the benefits they offer, just as the ignorant might dismiss a navigator as a stargazer (488) - it is perceived uselessness. This means that the people will not ask them to rule. Furthermore, just because they have true philosophical natures they will not desire rule, and will not ask to rule: "It isn't for the ruler, if he's truly any use, to beg the others to accept his rule" (489c). Thus, in cities as they stand, those few genuine philosophers who exist will indeed be useless, since their talents will be neither requested nor offered.

The vicious among philosophers are divided into two groups: those with true philosophic natures who are corrupted, and those who unworthily establish themselves in philosophy's way of life and merely imitate the philosophic nature. I am interested here in the corrupt among the vicious.

The problem for those with true natures is that "each of the things we praised in that nature tends to corrupt the soul that has it and to drag it away from philosophy" (491b), and all good things - beauty, health, physical strength, powerful relatives - also corrupt it (491c).

[T]he more vigorous any seed, developing plant, or animal is, the more it is deficient in the things that are appropriate for it to have when it is deprived of suitable food, season, or location. (491d)

With souls too, "those with the best natures become outstandingly bad when they receive a bad upbringing" (491e).

In cities as they are, young people are subjected to the demands and values of the crowd, and to the threat the crowd poses to any who remain unpersuaded (492c-d). Someone could only survive the education of the mob by a divine dispensation

(492e). Furthermore, those called sophists merely repeat the wisdom of the mob, inculcating the knack of handling this beast (493a-c).

Furthermore, anyone beginning life with the attributes of a philosopher - ease of learning, a good memory, courage and so on - will be courted and honoured by fellow citizens, "especially if his body has a nature that matches that of his soul" (494b). If such a person is advised that these attributes are not enough, and that he must work like a slave to attain understanding, he is unlikely to listen, and if he does listen, those who courted him will attempt to prevent him being persuaded, and will attack the persuader (494d-e). There is no chance such a person will practice philosophy.

[W]hen someone with a philosophic nature is badly brought up, the very components of his nature - together with the other so-called goods, such as wealth and other similar advantages - are themselves in a way the cause of his falling away. (495a)

We find, then, that what we might call a complete philosopher requires not merely a set of attributes, but also a suitable environment, one that will provide appropriate education and nurture, leading to a complete philosopher's life. This part of the discussion seems crucial to our understanding of the ambiguous way the philosopher's nature is treated. It is a nature in the sense of a given potentiality, but it is also a nature in the sense of a developed character and way of life. We find also that a nature is not inherently stable, and that in fact a philosopher's nature is, by virtue of its attributes, peculiarly unstable, and peculiarly dangerous (see 495a).

We see this double aspect of the nature when the discussion returns to the first group. For the philosophers who survive the fall into viciousness are also harmed by arising in inappropriate cities. They do defend themselves from this viciousness:

like someone who takes refuge under a little wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, the philosopher - seeing others filled with lawlessness - is satisfied if he can somehow lead his present life free from injustice and impious acts and depart from it with good hope, blameless and content. (496d-e)

Yet this is merely survival. While they are true philosophers in the sense of having a philosophical potential, they don't grow to their full potential and into a fully philosophical way of life. Under a suitable constitution a philosopher like this will have fuller growth, "and he'll save the community as well as himself." Under

unsuitable constitutions, such a nature "fails to develop its full power and declines into a different character" (479b). It is truly useless.

What we need, then, are a people who will ask philosophers to rule (or a god who will make kings into philosophers) (499b), and a constitution that will enable philosophers to develop a truly philosophical way of life.

It may be suggested that once we have philosophical natures inculcated into a philosophical way of life, the lying required by rule itself presents no threat. Such an objection could draw support from Socrates, who at 539e for example say of young philosophers that, while gaining experience in civil matters, "they must be tested to see whether they'll remain steadfast when they're pulled this way and that or shift their ground." So the idea could be that the whole point of developing such a way of life is to develop a nature that is not harmed by its engagement in base practices.

However, the way of life is not a static state. It is a process of exemplification and nurture of its attributes. It is not a matter of the nature being strong and so able to demean itself with impunity, but a matter of it being able to maintain itself as a way of life without falling. A philosopher, in Plato's ascetic conception, cannot hope to go along with the demands and values of the crowd and the practices of politics in the city, but remain somehow apart. Socrates makes it clear that this will not do, and that a philosopher's very attributes makes him or her especially vulnerable to such pressures. A philosopher, if the fall into viciousness is to be avoided, must stand apart from the practices that diminish and distort a philosopher's way of life. Yet a philosopher, so it seems, must lie in administration.

It might be said that in the new city the crowd will behave differently and different values and requirements will imbue its politics, but if administrative lies are required, then a feature of politics prior to this city is a feature of this city.

The philosopher's may be a nature defended against contact with base things, but it is not a nature defended against engagement in base practices itself. For the sign of its greatness as a nature and a way of life is its practice. The testing referred to earlier is to see whether the young can come into contact with base practices without weakening and engaging in them. Once philosophers engage in cowardice, immoderation, gossip, ... or untruthfulness, they show that they are not true philosophers, because they behave like the crowd. So if we insist that philosophers

lie, it is like insisting that they experience cowardice - and this would invoke a psychological theory that is not Plato's.

At this point some might suggest that lying is better seen as analogous to killing, rather than cowardice. So, just as we want to be sure that a philosopher can kill when necessary in battle without developing a blood-lust, we want to be sure that he or she can lie when necessary in administration without developing a love of untruth.

The analogy is appealing, since it neatly re-expresses the sort of point that Brickhouse and Smith and Reeve make: lies are to love of truth (love of the true), what killing is to moderation regarding the spirited part of one's soul. But the analogy fails, because moderation and love of truth are not comparable in this way. Moderation requires that we be balanced in the exercise of our capacities; but love of truth is an absolute demand, and its being held absolutely is the foremost sign of a philosopher during the discussion of philosopher-kings. Given the earlier argument that this demand speaks of all parts of one's imitative or worldly practice, not just one's engagement with the forms, it should not be qualified by some supposed requirements of administration.

## **5. Philosophers and Lies**

I will now, after summarising the argument so far, introduce a qualification to the assumptions on which the discussion has been based.

The defences note that the Republic's philosophers (the ones who become philosopher-kings) have knowledge of the forms, of the real and the good. They note that this knowledge, when applied to administration, means that the rulers, as philosophers, know the model they, as rulers, are trying to imitate. In ruling, the philosophers must at times lie, because non-philosophers will not be able to recognise the coincidence of their own best interest and that of the city (that is, of the requirements of justice), but must be brought to take part in an imitation of justice. Lies are the tool for this. In this there is no incoherence, for they act in the interests of the true and so still love truth (Brickhouse and Smith), and they utter verbal lies, not true lies, so do not cause the harm that true lies will (Reeve).

I have argued that the process of lying is undermining. Verbal lies are imitations of true lies, not the true. As imitations they have true lies as their model. The

philosopher knows the forms, and creates imitations while casting an eye on the forms - in both regards the philosopher is a unique type of mortal. This means that in the process of uttering a verbal lie, the philosopher must turn from the good to the true lie, and in this undermine the philosophical nature by failing to remain constant in the centrally defining characteristic of a philosophical nature.

I have also considered the fact that the philosopher-kings are introduced as mortals. The account of education suggests that while mortal natures are given, they are not given complete and they do not guarantee knowledge; they must be drawn out of potentiality. Furthermore, mortal natures, once formed, are not stable, but require discipline and the maintenance of a way of life. That aspect of the Republic shows that engagement with worldly untruth corrupts mortal natures. Even if verbal administrative lies are not corrupting in the way the first argument suggests, they are an engagement in a practice that will re-order and disorder the philosopher's way of life. Philosophical natures are subject to even more instability than other mortal natures, and so the practice of lying, be the lies in the interest of the true or not, will corrupt the natures of philosophers and disable them as imitators of justice.

In both cases, the philosopher-kings are destroyed by the requirement that they engage with two worlds and satisfy the demands of both.

Now a qualification, not so much to the argument I have presented, but to one of the assumptions required by the debate which motivates it. I asked at the beginning that we accept, as almost all commentators do, that Plato has Socrates recommend lies, and that the philosopher-kings are to be liars. I will say nothing here about the first point, but if I am right that a proposal that the Republic's philosopher-kings are to lie introduces an incoherent element to the work, an alternative response is to doubt that such a proposal is made seriously, or made at all.

With the idea that the proposal is not made seriously we hit murky (though rich) waters, which I will enter only briefly. In a Straussian approach Plato is seen as attempting to lead ordinary readers to salutary opinions, but to lead "men possessing the best natures" to the truth (see Strauss 1964, pp. 50-55). Applying this reading to our concerns, the wise reader will recognise that the idea that philosopher-kings may lie is made irrelevant by the absurdity of the thought of a just state, or will recognise the proposal as yet another aspect of the absurdity of a just state. Or we may adopt

an approach such as Drew Hyland's (1990) "hermeneutics of irony." Hyland shares some things with the Straussian approach but, in an extended analysis of the Three Waves, he derives a much more qualified and complex anti-utopianism. Centrally, Strauss found the overt recommendation of communism and equality of the sexes as a clear mark of the irony of this part of the Republic (because both are against nature) (1964, p. 127). Hyland, however, claims that the argument for gender equality is the only serious argument of the Three Waves, and that the irony of the others show that Plato thinks the solution to the Second Wave impossible and undesirable, and the solution to the Third Wave desirable but improbable and only really applicable to the justice of an individual's soul.

As one other example, we could look to Seery (1992), he finds irony operating at a higher level than the Straussians or even Hyland, and uncovers a progressive utopianism. As interesting as all this is (see also Berger 1987), I cannot go into it here. The point we can take from it is that once we allow the possibility of irony at some level above that of Socrates' own dialogic irony, apparent incoherence may become evidence, rather than a fault in the text - without here going into the question of just what, as evidence, the rulers' lies might point to.

Or perhaps the proposal is not made at all. This idea can be made consistent with the type of interpretation of Plato's project just mentioned, but it causes less interpretive strain (if that is a virtue) - and it is surprisingly well supported by the text. For instance, nowhere are we told that the philosopher-kings will lie. All we find is that philosophers love and honour truth in every way. In the earlier arguments I needed to read this according to Brickhouse and Smith's interpretation, but if we take seriously the difference between the philosopher-kings and earlier guardians, we might see it as applying to verbal lies also. We might also question the assumption that the philosopher-kings are mortal. The assumption that they lie means that they are mortal, I have argued. But if they are not mortal, then the argument against the gods lying applies also to the philosophers. It is true that Socrates only asks that they become as "divine and ordered as a human being can" (500d); but he also says that,

... if [the philosophic nature] were to find the best constitution, as it is itself the best, it would be clear that it is really divine and that other natures and ways of life are merely human. (497c)

When we combine this with the extraordinary suggestion that the philosophers will associate with the forms, whereas in the other middle period dialogues (specifically



the Symposium and the Phaedrus) this is impossible for mortals we seem to have two options. We might conclude that philosopher-kings are divine truth-tellers. This reading might be supported by the comment at 502b that "if a ruler established the laws and ways of life we've described, it is surely not impossible that the citizens would be willing to carry them out," which suggests that they wouldn't need to lie. Or, we could say that the philosophers associate with the forms and are mortals, and regard this as ironically absurd. So rather than taking the incoherence of the lies as a sign of irony, we would take the sign to be the incoherence of the nature of a philosopher capable of ruling - a nature both human and divine.

The argument in Section 4 does not rest on these suggestions. My claim has been that a proposal that philosopher-kings lie is incoherent. By the qualifications, I wonder whether Plato is committed to such incoherence.

## **6. Conclusion: Government and Deceit**

I began with a question about the acceptability of administrative lies in general. I then turned to the specific question of the coherence of Plato's philosopher-kings as liars. How does the response to Plato (Plato seen as recommending administrative lies by philosopher-kings) bear on the response to the general question? Supposing (as we must in the context of this discussion) that we can make clear sense of the notions of truth and truthfulness, □ the following points can be made.

The account in the Republic can be seen as, in the course of setting out the ideal conditions for a just state, setting out the ideal conditions under which administrative lying is acceptable. It is acceptable there, if anywhere, because the ones who lie genuinely know the truth of the matters of which they speak falsely, and genuinely know how to administer lies beneficently, while the ones who are lied to are by nature ignorant, spirited and narrow-minded, and thus incapable of ordering their lives in the light of the true or the good. Yet, if I am right in Section 4, the nature of a Platonic philosopher will be corrupted if it engages in the activity which it is, by nature, uniquely able to carry out well.

Clearly, objections can be raised. Imagine as a respondent someone committed to liberal democracy, but who asks that we recognize political reality, plus the vagaries of individual and social psychology. Such a person might ask that all this concern with the Republic should be put aside: we should make judgements by weighing

liberal principles against political and psychological reality. It might then be argued that while honesty is the ideal of representative democracy, a degree of (judicious) dishonesty will be necessary and indeed virtuous, in the general interest. We might be asked to imagine what would happen if the leaders of modern democratic states were indiscriminately honest.

Well, probably we will never know; yet we do know what happens often enough as things stand - and these things happen because we lack the ideal conditions on which Plato's position might draw. Our leaders are not chosen in virtue of their being philosophers - even were there Platonic philosophers on which to call - and their 'viciousness' and 'ignorance' means that they lack the capacity to lie wisely (medicinally). Furthermore, the need to lie recognized by Plato arises from his assumption of the incorrigible ignorance and narrow-mindedness of the many. If we deny any metaphysical basis for this assumption, if we insist that the modern citizen is not incorrigibly unable to recognize the general good, the second side of an attempted justification also falls.

Thus, the Republic remains relevant, for this response simply repeats part of the position of the Republic, but adds a liberal regret. What it lacks is a principled account of the necessity of administrative lies, or of the possibility of their judicious application.

Yet a stronger response can be made. Why not grant the fallibility of leaders, and the (relative) perfectibility of the many, and then think of the necessity of what we might call protective lies (as a subset of medicinal lies)? It might be suggested that a state's international position could surely not sustain unqualified non-domestic openness. Imagine the requirements of a state at war, for example. If this were granted as a situation in which lies were justified, it would then follow that this type of dishonesty requires - and so indirectly justifies - a level of domestic dishonesty. The point here would be that the state cannot afford to have members undermining the party line. Furthermore, noting that lies towards one's enemies begin the explication of acceptable verbal lies at 382, we could in turn try to justify lies towards the insane and foolish. The respondent might acknowledge that we cannot assume with Plato that the many are in some sense always insane or foolish - but point out that on occasion something like this would arise. An example is a threatened run on the banks caused by public panic, in the face of which government officials might lie in

the hope of avoiding economic collapse. Another example might be again in war, when domestic panic would undermine the state's defence, and can be forestalled by lies.

I think that the possibility of such cases mean that we should resist a blanket denial of the acceptability of administrative lies - and allow the possibility of necessary defensive lies. But I also want to highlight the weaknesses of the appeal. First, the appeal assumes that we can reliably identify such cases - cases in which dishonest would be an effective (and the only) way of defending the state. Yet it is hard to see how this would be possible. So we might allow that such cases are justified occasions of lying, but be unsure just when such cases arise. Secondly, even if such cases can be identified, the intuitions in favour of them being justified occasions for lies depend on an as yet unjustified faith in the capacity of leaders to lie well and virtuously, to lie so as to effectively defend the state. Thirdly, even were these problems overcome, we return to the corrupting effect of the lies. These occasions, supposing that they possess specific justification, are likely (unless we have leaders with very special characteristics, or a cleverly worked-out system of change of leadership after crises) to generate an administrative culture of secrecy and deceit, and be used by extension in the service of self-interest and expediency - possibly undoing any good the original lies may have achieved. These concerns suggest while the cases invoked have strong intuitive appeal, this depends on the satisfaction of conditions which we have little or no reason to expect.

A parenthetical comment in the last paragraph suggests a further qualification.□ My position depends in part on there being no account, different from Plato's, according to which administrative omniscience (or something sufficiently close to omniscience) is possible, yet allowing us to avoid the incoherence to which Plato's rulers-as-liars are subject. I accept that. Yet I am unable to imagine what such an account would look like.

Thus, while noting the partial qualifications, I deny that administrative lies can be justified. My denial does not rest on a naive belief in the wisdom or rationality of modern citizens; nor does it rest on setting the form of justice as our goal. Rather, the denial involves first, rejecting any metaphysical basis for the general incorrigibility of 'the many', second, pointing out that our leaders are drawn from the many, and

third, noting that even if something like Platonic conditions could be invoked, this would not, because of the corrupting effects of such acts, justify administrative lies.

I return to the point of using the Republic as a vehicle for the discussion. The Republic can be seen as setting out the ideal conditions for the in-principle acceptability of governing or administrative lies. These ideal conditions, in turn, are the epitome of the 'realism' to which a defender of such lies is inclined to appeal. Seen as an ideal they fail to justify the lies, and so also when seen as the conditions of political realism.<sup>4</sup>

## References

- Berger, H. Jr. (1987) 'Levels of Discourse in Plato's Dialogues,' in A. J. Cascardi (ed.), *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 75-100.
- Brickhouse, T. C. & N. D. Smith 1983, 'Justice and Dishonesty in Plato's Republic,' *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 21, 1983, pp. 79-95.
- Hyland, D. A. (1990) 'Plato's Three Waves and the Question of Utopia,' *Interpretation*, 18, 1990, pp. 91-109.
- Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).
- Reeve, C. D. C. (1988) *Philosopher-Kings: The Arguments of Plato's Republic*, (Princeton: Princeton U. P.).
- Seery, J. E. (1992) 'Spelunkers of the World, Unite!,' in D. W. Conway & J. E. Seery (eds), *The Politics of Irony* (New York: St. Martin's Press), pp. 7-29.
- Strauss, L. (1964) *The City and Man* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
- Vernezze, P. (1992) 'The Philosopher's Interest,' *Ancient Philosophy*, 12, 1992, pp. 331-349.
- Vlastos, G. (1965) 'Degrees of Reality in Plato,' in his *Platonic Studies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 58-75.

## Notes

- 1 Brickhouse & Smith claim that in an educative myth, "while starting with something that is strictly speaking false, one arrives at a conclusion that is true. Thus, one is not deceived by a proper myth; one is enlightened by it" (1993, p. 84). The noble lie, they think, begins from the falsehood that all people are born of the earth and have different metals in their souls, but leads to the truth (by

Plato's lights) that there are by nature three classes of people, and that all citizens are like brothers.

- 2 The defences therefore share basic features with an "educative myth" defence. The difference is that they claim, not that the citizens will be brought via falsehood always to have true beliefs, but that they will be brought via falsehood to participate in a truer imitation.
- 3 For an interesting discussion, see Vernezze (1992).
- 4 I am grateful for comments on earlier versions of this paper by Anita Devos, Susan Dodds, Catriona McKenzie, and Alexander Nehamas.